

A Sunny Outlook – By Mulman

ESSEX, UK – Tough Stuff Farm No. 46.

“Across the broken and muddy ground, the Samu-Knight approached. Clad in shining cloak and aided by his fae-being of great magics and loyal retainers he marched towards the farmstead. His mind strong and senses sharp, he stopped on the edge of the torn fencing, looking at the tragic sight before him”.

“Well, this looks like a den of evil” I said.

“That is the fourth time you have said that, and I do really think you should see someone about the monologuing, or at least get some tips on how to refine it, your cadence is off”

Standing in my proud stance I suddenly sagged, frowning before making my response.

“Didn’t ask Alsace, but yeah this is starting to get tiring, you think we found the main hive yet?”

“Only one way to find out, deploying A1s to scout”

From behind me came a small hovering object the size of a medium sized umbrella, before several more joined it. They appeared to be strangely similar to some combination of jellyfish and squid, with a shiny cylinder protruding outwards followed by a clump of waving filaments similar to tentacles or vines that shined a deep blue.

“I really think we should start using SunDrops, it’s what they’re going to be called when the merchandise is released”

“Following our last conversation on the matter, ‘SunDrops’ is the fifth name you have used in regards to the A1s. Do you not recall the Solar Scouts?”

Sighing a little I responded “Okay yeah, fair, but SunDrops works and I’m gonna stick to it this time”

“Perhaps, but I believe we should begin our reconnaissance of the area, this was noted in the recent report sent to you by Father Piper as having reported some refugees from the global incursion. They had been staying here waiting for housing assignment but then went silent, without even an expected cry for help”

“Yeah I remember. Why’d you have to take that call from him though? This could’ve been a message or something”

“You are still bitter as to him naming you I take it? It has been 3 months”

I frowned, thinking it over. I’d only been a Samurai for short time, given my status after fighting off a small incursion from a coastal hive that flared up when no one was looking. I’d never been that into them beyond the basics, figuring I’d never have to worry about it, but like any kid, I’d dreamt about what I would do if I were chosen. I’d had a plan, what sort of weapons to go for, what strategies would work. Anything to ignore what was going on around me back where I used to have to live.

So, when destiny arrived I’d hoped for a name like Solar Wave, or WarmSwarm, but nooo, the first Samurai I’d got in contact with on that day turned out to be the paternal sort who thought he was a comedian. So now I was stuck with his chosen name, ‘Sonny Day’ (*Sunny*, I insisted whenever someone asked to clarify). Didn’t help of course that along with that the

voice in my head came with an older sounding gruff voice that tried to act like a parent who also thought they were a comedian. I hadn't needed supervision when I'd left that shithole of a home, I certainly didn't need an AI, no matter how advanced, trying to tell me how to live.

I continued to walk across the muddy ground into the old farm area, some signs of smaller 'cooperative corporations' showing up on wrecked equipment and signs talking about the Real™ meat on offer.

Okay, that was unfair, Alsace had always had my back and hadn't ever forced me to do anything I didn't want to do. Though the fact that to design some of my gear I'd had to learn the basics on how they worked made me think I was being educated without my approval. I hadn't heard of any other Samurai who were forced to study particle physics and energy systems but maybe they all just didn't talk about it because it was embarrassing. It's why I'd never asked, since if the answer was no then either something was wrong with Alsace, or with him.

Suddenly my Samurai grade helmet lit up with a warning.

LEVEL 3 ANTITHESIS DETECTED

And like that it was time to work. My small squad of A1s (SunDrops) floated in front with a few covering other approaches. Bursting from the nearby barn came a group of Model Three's, running full pelt to get to me.

"Targets selected, beginning elimination"

The A1s starting firing, red lasers pulsing out with no sound save a small hiss as the filaments aligned to maximise the amount of sunlight on them to recharge their small onboard batteries. On their own it would take several shots to take down even a single Model Three. But that's why I went for modular technology early in my catalogue purchases.

As the Model Three's became pockmarked with small holes and burns the A1s started lining up until they were in a straight line pointed forwards. With a small 'Tink' of sound they joined together, filaments connected and cylinders aligning before resuming their fire, deeper red projectiles firing from them. The lasers increased power now pierced through the Model Three's hide, and even over penetrated at points. Limbs were sliced off and the last one was nearly fully bisected before they came within 10 metres. I looked at the results and hummed.

"I think we need to maybe start beginning with a combined unit at the forefront. If there'd been more that might have been an issue"

"Perhaps, but this small group would have been dealt with even without combination, I just regarded it as more efficient time and energy wise to perform the task this way"

"I guess. Okay well no sense waiting around, let's see what had them spooked enough to attack now instead of ambush us in the barn"

Looking down at the fissure in the muddied and hay covered floor, I frowned.

"Do we, have to go into the hole?" I asked, definitely not whining at all.

"We could send in the drones but unless you want to finally get that telepresence upgrade we will have a loss of efficiency approaching 32%"

I continued to frown for a bit before sighing.

“You know I’m trying to save my points for when shit really hits the fan. Okay let’s go. Call up the Furnaces and give me a few Novas and start up some of the D4s”

“Doing so now”

A small droning hum started up in the distance, getting slightly louder as his two support units, the furnaces, appeared. Looking like a rectangular angled prism with holes dotting it, the SunDrops I’d brought along slotted in filament first. Turning the unarmed unit into a combat capable drone. The small fusion engine on board then started charging the depleted drones. A small beam of light appeared next, letting out more small drones with a small hexahedron body compared to the cylindrical SunDrops.

I hated fighting underground or at night, so the furnaces tended to be useful to recharge my stuff when I found myself in these sorts of situations. I considered once again getting a suit catalogue to maybe carry around a fusion engine on me, but I was still a bit worried about carrying something so potentially deadly right next to my body in case it got hit by some Antithesis whilst I dodged. I’d stick with the small battery and solar cloak I wore for now.

Eventually the D4’s turned up. They weren’t as fast as the SunDrops, and I was still wondering the best name for them. Solar Shields or Sun Guards were the top two currently. Holding out my arm the units attached their filaments to the slots in my armour, aligning their projectors to create a light shield when called upon. I really needed to pick a sword already, but couldn’t decide on having a plasma blade or a new type of drone that would do the job. I liked having options after all. Also starting a new catalogue path would cost more than just sticking to my current set up.

Magnetically attaching my hand to the furnace closest to me, I sent some SunDrops down to check the area before jumping down, using the furnace hover capability to slow my fall.

As I slowly fell the SunDrops filaments started to glow and light up the area, some heading to the ceiling of the cavern I found myself landing in. All around me though, were bodies. A herd of various cloned animals attached to the walls or the ground, looking drained and slightly decayed, with piles of plants sitting in small trenches, melting from the looks of it in the strange digestive liquid Antithesis used to store its ‘meals’ sometimes.

What was strange was the lack of people though. Either they’d been digested first or something strange was going on. Moving through the cavern I kept the SunDrops on a high alert status. Last thing I needed was a Model Seven going for me. I’d had enough of those when I’d tried to help that convoy a few weeks back. As I moved ahead, I saw an opening, large enough for me to walk through with some squeezing. My SunDrops sent ahead lit up the area, looking for threats, as I got through another alert popped up.

HUMAN LIFESIGNS DETECTED – CAUTION – NO SIGNS OF REACTION TO A1 UNITS – POSSIBLE MODEL SEVEN INFECTION

‘Well that’s just perfect’ I thought. Cautiously I turned my helmet into its sealed mode and hoped the rest of my armour would stop any nasty visitors trying to get through it.

Moving into the room, I saw something unexpected.

Bodies, human bodies, at least a few dozen, all laying face up on the ground. Small cords of Antithesis vine protruding from them and all joining into a central cord that led into another cavern.

"Fascinating, these must be the refugees the report informed us about"

"What have you got for me Alsace?" I said, cautiously getting closer to take a look at a random body. The older man seemed intact, with a peaceful look on his face, small movements indicating he was breathing but not much else. This didn't feel like Model Sevens, not like what I'd encountered before. The small cord was actually connected to some weird helmet looking thing, small pustules across it moving up and down, almost like pumps.

"They appear to be in a comatose near braindead state, with hormones and brain matter being slowly encouraged to be produced by the body in an almost cancerous way. If they didn't have those harvesters on their heads the resultant neural tissue being created would have burst through the skull already"

Feeling queasy I tried to get my mind off of what had just been described "You got all that from cords sticking out and their freaky headwear?"

"This is not the first instance of this Antithesis method of harvesting encountered"

"Really? I never heard of Antithesis doing something like this. Don't they usually just tear people apart and, or just digest them once they get near a hive?"

"You are correct but allow me to clarify. This type of harvesting by Antithesis has been encountered before. But never has it been seen on Earth. It's too inefficient. The only times this has been encountered has been when the victim species has a much higher density of brain matter and sophisticated neural biology"

"So wait we're too dumb for this to work?"

"In a word? Yes. Whilst this has been observed as a means for an Antithesis to improve its production and mutation capabilities, it would take an extremely large number of humans or other neurally complex Earth species to even equal a basic harvest of a more complex one from another world. Either the hive is damaged in some way and defaulting to another structured state more suited to another planet or it has found something in these people that has encouraged this behaviour. Along with the neural tissue it also is used to produce and harvest more complex chemicals produced by complex neural activity"

"Well we can work it out later if they survive" I said, standing up, watching my step as I followed the cords to the next room. "But just because I'm curious, how many of those more bigger brain species do those people equal?"

"Roughly? Calculating for the 50 bodies we saw there? Approximately 2 to maybe 3 members of the species with the lowest amount of brain matter this Antithesis behaviour has been observed in before. Do not feel too bad though for humanity. For many of those species, that extra brain matter does not automatically equal higher intelligence. Sometimes it just means a greater capacity in their visual cortex due to complex lighting conditions on their worlds"

“Well that makes me feel better I guess. Come on, let’s go cut off the junky from its brain soup. Prepare some medical stuff as well if you think it’ll help and leave some M-no, SunnyDocs ready to deploy in case we can help them”

“Summoning ‘Sunny Docs’ as requested. There might be something a nano-suite can do for them, but as this is the first instance dealing with this situation with humans. I cannot guarantee anything at this time”

“Do what we can Alsace, can’t ask for more”

“That, is not a standard hive”

Agreed, perhaps it is damaged in some way as I speculated earlier?”

What awaited them in the cavern was different from the small jungles I’d had encountered before. Instead, it felt more swamp like, with sacs lined up along the ground and stuffed onto the walls. The main body of the hive reminded me more of a mushroom than a flowering plant, all textured trunk looking spongy and an off colour head which seemed to be pumping. Most likely it was providing the force necessary to get the brain juice from next door into it before processing it.

“And that explains why we haven’t met too many smaller models apart from the group outside. This thing must be on its last legs. Wait, this means this isn’t even the main hive. Goddamn it.”

“I’m afraid so, but this unorthodox Earth based behaviour is novel enough to make it worth the trip”

“Maybe, but this feels like I could’ve just sent in drones. Well, we can tally the costs later. Before that, let’s check it out.”

“Agreed, sending in SunDrops”

Slowly the small basic drones moved in, coming closer to the main mushroomy body before suddenly being struck from above. Shattering and crashing to the ground.

I stepped back quickly, my visor barely recording any movement. Alsace thankfully backtracked the footage until I could see it, a small whip like cord swiping the drone before returning up from whence it appeared.

I didn’t feel like doing it, but swallowing slightly I looked up.

The ceiling was, for lack of a better word, undulating. Dozens or even hundreds of coiled Antithesis cords moving in confusing patterns, like a nest of snakes. As another SunDrop was sent in, I saw via my HUD how there were hundreds of thinner than hair filaments hanging from the mass on the ceiling. As the drone brushed one slightly the cords tensed, almost in anticipation. As it continued moving forwards a cord suddenly whipped out, taking it out with just as much speed and violence.

“Alsace?”

“Yes?”

"Is Apollo in position by any chance? Because I do not like my chances even if I summon a lot of bomb drones on getting through that before it rips either my drones apart or me".

"Checking. Yes it is in a position to fire, and should be capable of reaching this far, would you like to deploy it now?"

I checked the entrance hole behind me, judging the diameter and size of the room.

"Give me a minute and summon some heavier D4s. I want to block off the doorway as much as we can"

"Preparing Apollo, I have informed the relevant authorities of it's deployment"

"Thanks Alsace, okay let me just step into the other room and then get the D4s to overlap as much as they can, plug in the furnaces if you think it's needed"

"You know we could just block the hole with some strong material?"

"Yeah we could, but I want to see this"

"Very well. Preparing to polarise the lens plate"

A minute or so later we were ready. Dozens of small D4 defence drones hovered and connected in front of the hole, their shimmering slightly transparent shield allowing me to see just enough as the timer in my HUD counted down.

As soon as it hit zero I looked at the feed from the drones outside as a beam, or perhaps more accurately a pillar, of light suddenly appeared. From inside I could see the hive reacting to the heat above, almost seemingly trying to move towards it before being vaporised as the light breached and then consumed the room. The D4s collective shield flared from the heat but held up well enough.

The view was great though, as a new hole was opened to the sky above.

'Worth every points' I thought as all traces of the hive and a few feet down were burnt in a rather thorough way.

As the light died down I turned to the group of people who the SunDocs were hovering near, injecting them to help them recover from their ordeal.

Maybe they'd find the main hive next? I felt I had to do something to get enough points before Phobos arrived. Maybe even enough for another Apollo?

It's not like I'd burn an ancient forest down, again.